

Politics and Cinematography in THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY by Jorge Samjinés:

talk given at the MARXISM AND FILM WORKSHOP, MLA, Dec. 1976, N.Y.

How do we evaluate the political decisions made in a political film? Today I would like to discuss THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY by Jorge Samjinés and the Ukumau collective in order to trace the interaction between political analysis and cinematic structure in a political film. Every political filmmaker selects and omits material in terms of a conscious theoretical analysis. And the cinematography and structure of the finished film itself reveal social and political attitudes and perhaps ambiguities. In other words, we can discuss both the filmmakers' conscious political decisions and what the completed film itself finally reveals.

Jorge Samjinés' Ukumau group, which also made BLOOD OF THE CONDOR, filmed THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY in the Peruvian Andes with villagers speaking their native Quechua. The film was made for discussion, especially in villages such as that portrayed in the film. Although I shall not be talking today about the film's local reception, I shall challenge its political and cinematic ambiguities, with the premise that clarity and not ambiguity would produce the best political discussion.

THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY is divided loosely into three main sections. In the first, a farmer Julian Huamantica protests against the landlord Carilles' stealing his bull. Carilles kills and beheads the farmer. The farmer's anguished wife takes her husband's head and shows it silently in the village. The enraged villagers seize the landlord and his henchman and bring them to the local magistrate for justice. The sheriff takes depositions but lets Carilles go and later locks up the accusers instead.

In the second part of the film, wounded and famished guerrillas, presumably Cuban, crawl up a hill side to safety. They have one Quechua-speaking member who persuades a woman to sell them food.

They gain the villagers' support through running a small medical clinic and through working with the villagers in the fields. They help the villagers gain justice by trying the landlord and his henchman in a people's court and then executing the two. However, although they gain popular support, when the guerrillas later ask the people to join their band of active fighters who will move on from village to village, only a few <sup>peasants</sup> do.

The last part of the film deals with the retaliation of "the principal enemy" against the villagers. And the principal enemy is imperialism -- in this case, the national army guided by US military advisers and supplied with US weapons. The army wipes out the defenseless peasants. The guerrillas, now in the rain forest lowlands, fight an intense gun battle, and a few emerge to keep fighting on.

The film's episodes are tied together by an old Incan peasant narrator who starts his tale at the great Incan ruin Macchu Piccu and at the end is seen outlined against the sky, climbing a mountain, with the sounds of bombs in the background.

The general political purpose of the film is both didactic and inspirational. As an inspirational film, it aims to stimulate resistance to repression. It has a mythic simplification and a mythic grandeur. And it raises as a strategic issue for the audience's consideration and discussion Che Guevara's foco theory of revolution in South America. Any Latin American audience seeing this film would recognize both the use of Che's ideas as a model upon which the filmic portrayal of the guerrillas was based and also an ambiguousness about these ideas as they are raised in the film.

However admirable Guevara's ambitions for the continent were, his strategy in fact was disasterous. The foco theory of revolution said that political action by the guerrillas in the backlands would

come first, mass support and party building later. Che's group in Bolivia in 1967 could not speak the Indian dialects, had little knowledge of the terrain, and knew none of the Indian social structures and customs. Yet Guevara had intended that his group of guerrillas would not only be a mobile strategic force but also the foco or focal point of revolution in Latin America, for which they would provide a military training center as well as the political coordinating center for local national insurgencies. Actually Che had planned to join up with the then active Peruvian guerrillas, but they were captured in 1965 before he even got started in Bolivia. To his credit, Che had the strategic intent, which he never carried out, of creating a liberated zone, where popular government could effectively function.

THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY uses the Che model and seems even to want to criticize it. But all criticisms the film makes of that model are weak and ambiguous. In terms of Che's most obvious failures -- no knowledge of the language and no contact with the people -- the film just endows its group with other qualities. For example, the way the guerrillas establish rapport with the community by working with them is one of the strongest and best sequences in the film. And if being in close contact with the local population is here seen as one of the primary prerequisites for a guerrilla group, the filmmakers developed this concept by using two other historical models for their fictional portrayal. These models were those of Hector Bejar and Hugo Blanco, only one of which is recognizable in the film.

The model not acknowledged by the filmmakers is that of Hugo Blanco, Trotskyist organizer and popular hero, who organized peasant unions in the Cuzco, Peru, area from 1958 to 1963, when he

was hunted down and jailed. Blanco did not create the peasant federations, but those that existed were run by Spanish-speaking Communist Party members in a top-down way from regional headquarters. In contrast, Blanco lived with the people, spoke Quechua, and travelled constantly to do face to face organizing. In those years there was a high degree of peasant militancy with many land takeovers and the creation of small-scale peasant militias to defend the land that was reclaimed. Peruvian Andean villagers would remember Blanco even now, but the only indication that the makers of THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY considered his influence when making their film is the fact that the narrator, Saturnino Huillca, has, in fact, been a leader in peasant union organizing for the last thirty years. This is not mentioned in the film. (It is a bit like using Saul Alinsky as narrator in a US film and not identifying him.)

The specific abuses related in the film -- Carilles' execution of the farmer and the subsequent jailing of the peasants who testified, were first described in Hector Bejar's NOTES ON A PERUVIAN GUERRILLA EXPERIENCE: 1965. Bejar was leader of one of three student-led Peruvian guerrilla groups in the mid-1960's (the ones Che had hoped to connect up with). If we compare the film to Bejar's accounts, we can see that not only did these guerrillas have a good rapport with the local people, but also that the peasants in Ayacucho were far more militant and independent than the film showed them to be. Both Bejar and Blanco, unlike Che, were highly conscious of how important it was to know the social structure of the peasantry, but the film shows little of the social infrastructure of peasant life. We do not see their <sup>villages</sup> relation with other communities, nor does the film show the crucial difference between working on a hacienda and working on communally owned lands. We do not see any of the whole

long history of the peasants' defense of their lands nor their land seizures of the late '50's. THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY also does not indicate the way cooptational ideology is propagated by merchants, priests, and transistor radios. In fact, in that particular area in the mid-1960's, land was pretty well divided between the largest hacienda in the whole province, owned by Carilles, and communal landownings. A whole year before Bejar's group had arrived in Ayacucho, a shyster had tried to trick the people out of their communal deeds. As a result, they had gathered together all across the area in coordinated groups to watch night and day for the so-called new owners to come in. The peasants repeatedly kicked out the fraudulent claimants and also intimidated the police and local military from interfering in the shysters' behalf. The film does not show us this incident, which so aptly reveals the local popular strength and capacity for self-determination, a strength which existed prior to the guerrillas' arrival. Instead, the film gives us a picture of a helpless group, easily tricked, unaware of their own power, and needing the guerrillas to show them the way.

All the real-life guerrillas -- Blanco, Bejar, and then Regis Debray as he wrote on Che Guevara -- regretted that they had not foreseen the massive military repression and massacres that followed guerrilla insurgency. And they all apologized for their premature moves and said they were forced by the enemy to come into the open too soon. In contrast, the film's guerrillas do not seem to consider the effect the effect their actions will have on their local supporters, whom they leave to be wiped out. And these filmic guerrillas were not "forced" by events to act in a way that would invite repression -- as Bejar, Blanco, and Che were. Rather, they were the ones who made the move to execute the landlord. The execution was presumably an act of people's power, but it was done before

there was a liberated zone to protect the people.

So far I have discussed the film's relation to three historical modes of Andean guerrilla warfare. Internal to the film, in its cinematography, certain kinds of filmic styles make the filmmakers' political stance very clear, and others reflect unresolved or ambiguous attitudes toward the political material being filmed. If we look at the cinematic structuring techniques in the film as a whole, we find four basic types of sequences: 1) sequences with the narrator addressing the camera, 2) action sequences, 3) long takes showing the community as a whole, and 4) sequences composed of what I shall call "epic shots" showing the people at one with their Andean background. The four types are interspersed throughout the film and their alternation gives the film a patterned simplicity. The cinematography and the composition in the third and fourth kinds of sequences, the ones showing the people, provide the film with a great visual beauty and are extremely innovative in establishing the people as a whole as the hero of the film.

In the first type of sequence, those with the narrator, the shots of the old man are usually symmetrically composed and shot face on. His words and static appearance destroy tension. He tells us what has already happened, and with the voice of wisdom, he comments on the political events. He is like the old man in Jungian mythology who tells us how to endure the trial and shows us the way. Significantly he criticizes the guerrillas for leaving the village and moving on. This is the only political critique in the film and is made just before the scenes of military repression. Yet this statement goes by very fast, is counterbalanced visually by the guerrillas' heroic emergence from the jungle at the end, and

is a gentle critique at that. He states: "Here in the mountains we peasants are more numerous. The guerrillas went into the uninhabited jungle and we stayed in the village. Together we'd have been better organized and could have fought more successfully."

Action cutting sequences convey moments of tension. They also move the story briskly forward. One of the problems of the film is that--in contrast to the epic style used to film the peasants -- the guerrillas' arrival, their activities, their capture of Carilles, and their final battle against the US-equipped troops are all shot in a stereotypical John-Wayne-war-film kind of style. This creates a tremendous visual ambiguity which undercuts the effectiveness of the film.

In contrast, two kinds of sequences express the peasants' group solidarity and their oneness with the land. In sequences of group discussion or group action, the camera often moves in a circle around the group. The camera knits the group together. At the same time, it makes us an observer on, not a vicarious participant in, the action. Other sequences show us small groups or figures in extreme long shot against the sky, with white peaks in the background, or against the cultivated fields. These I call "epic"shots. They give the film a mythic dimension, tying the people to the land. And these shots, which are also associated with the narrator, in effect proclaim, "These are the people, and these are the moments that symbolize their whole life."

To sum up, I shall describe two parts of the film that demonstrate most clearly how cinematic and political ambiguities are inextricably mixed. In a key sequence of the film where the guerrillas explain their larger purpose, they are sitting inside a

peasant's hut. The camera is static. The dialogue is as follows: "We are guerrillas and are ready for anything, so that the whole people can have a better life. For that we need a socialist government." The peasant says, "Yes, that would be fine." The guerrillas explain the relation of imperialism to landowners like Carilles. The peasant finally responds, "I have confidence in you because you are good people who have our welfare at heart. I must talk this over with my friends." Not only is the camera work static, so is the political dialogue, and this is the only sequences of political explanation in the film. Time after time in the film, the peasants are shown as responding to a moral presence rather than acting out of their own political sense. They say yes to leadership but do not participate in it.

I shall cite one other example to establish that the filmmakers themselves did not intend to criticize severely Che's foco theory of revolution, although the film itself ends up doing so. Undoubtedly the film followed by discussion could itself raise many of the issues I have brought up here. However, on an emotional level, the film valorizes the guerrillas almost absolutely by its manipulative use of heroic music, first associated with the villagers and then with the guerrillas. Originally a native melody played on flutes accompanies the peasants as they trek across the Andes. When they take the landlord from the hacienda into town to the sheriff's office, the theme swells. As they leave town en masse, the theme becomes more militant, enhanced with drums. Combined here with epic shots of the people against the Andean background, the musical theme conveys the message of the people's nobility and strength, and of the rightness of their struggle. By the end of the film, as the guerrilla fighters emerge from the

jungle and then as the old narrator is framed against the sky, the theme is played with full orchestration, finally mingling with the sound of bombs. The theme is now identified with the guerrillas. And any criticism we might of had of them is muted by this heroic ending.

To summarize my methodology, I have tried to evaluate this film's political message both in terms of the filmmakers' inclusion or exclusion of relevant political material and in terms of the connotations conveyed by the structure and cinematography of the film itself. My criticism of the film rests on two points. First, the structure of the film is politically ambiguous. Second, whole concepts essential to any analysis of revolutionary strategy are missing from the film. At the same time, I want to emphasize that the film is well worth seeing. It is a visually beautiful and inspiring portrait of the Andean people. However, as a stimulus to serious political discussion, it is incomplete.

-----